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Research report

Food in the family. Bringing young people back in

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes eating and beliefs about family meals in the qualitative interview narratives of 30 "at-risk" gang-involved young women in the San Francisco Bay Area. We begin our examination of consumption practices with a study of households and identify three major types—extended, single-parent and blended. Within these households, food purchasing and consumption activities are varied, and in many cases, our respondents rely upon extended family members and non-kin relations for support. In examining eating within the family, we identify two sets of practices and meanings: eating alone, and eating with others. Eating alone is symbolic of independence from one's family of origin, or is the result of familial conflict at the dinner table; however, it does not necessarily change our respondents' eating patterns. Eating with others in the family remains important, and many of the young women value family meals, although there are significant obstacles to eating regularly with the entire nuclear family. Many of these young women play an important role in the purchasing and preparation of food for family members as well. This paper highlights the importance of understanding family eating practices from the perspective of young people in the family, whose contribution to family ingestive practices has tended to be underestimated in much of available research literature.

Introduction

The eating practices of young people have become the focus of much public concern, whether it is their consumption of snacks and fast foods, developing eating disorders, or engaging in unhealthy dieting. Obesity among children and adolescents is also viewed as a major public health issue, with recent studies showing 13% of children and adolescents in the United States are obese (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, Lamb, & Flegal, 2010). In seeking both culprits and solutions for these dietary problems, pundits have pointed accusing fingers at the family, focusing on parental influences and family eating practices and decrying the decline of the family meal. (Sweeting & West, 2005; Davis, 1995, p. 356, cited in Murcott, 1997; Jackson, 2009). Given the importance of the family as a socializing agent, and the important influence it has on food and eating practices, it is not that surprising that a considerable amount of attention has focused on the family as the cause of dietary problems (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Coveney, 2002; Lupton, 1996; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003; Roos, Lahelma, Virtanen, Prättälä, & Pietinen, 1998).

The family meal

Two emphases are implicit within much of the writing on family eating practices. The first examines the causes of the decline of the family meal and the second looks at the consequences of this decline. First, the decline of the family meal is examined as symptomatic of a diminution in the overall centrality of the family. The decline of the family meal, in these analyses, is associated with the dominance of fast foods, the necessity for mothers to work outside the home, and increasing societal pressures on the family (Gofton, 1995; Hewitt, 1993; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Schor, 1992).[1] As individualization of post-modern society increases, the likelihood of eating with other family members is reduced. Greater individualization leads to an increase in diverse diets and individualized eating practices within the single household (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 78. See also Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Fine & Leopold, 1993).

The second theme is that the decline of the family meal is associated with a number of serious social and physiological consequences, especially for young people. These have included a serious deterioration in the quality of young peoples' diets (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2003; Videon & Manning, 2003), an increase in eating-related disorders (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall,

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[1] However as Gillis (1996) notes, worries about the eclipse of family time have also occurred before, for example in both the 1920s and the 1940s.

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Story, & Fulkerson, 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007), and a decline in family relationships (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). These developments are associated with a subsequent increase in behavioral problems outside the home, for example problematic school behaviors, early sexual activity, suicidal risk and increased alcohol and drug consumption (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Fulkerson, & Story, 2008; Franko, Thompson, Affenito, Striegel-Moore, & Barton, 2008; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). In these studies, the family meal is portrayed as a protective factor against anti-social behavior (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006; Gillman et al., 2000; Weinstein, 2005).

Regardless of which theme is emphasized, the family is clearly deemed a central component for food and diet research and an especially important factor in influencing young people's diets. Both approaches share a common vision that ascribes to the family a central role as both an institution of primary socialization and a crucial societal foundation stone. Similarly, anthropologists have long noted the importance of food sharing as a ritualized, symbolic gesture to enhance solidarity between the recipients (Douglas, 1984). Food sharing is a vital component of kinship networks and the home; the family meal has a deep emotional and social significance in establishing coherence and solidarity, as well as operating to socialize young members (Lupton, 1996). Bringing family members together around the table is believed to produce cohesion (Kuper, 1993; Fulkerson et al., 2006; Valentine, 1999).

Reappraising the family meal

In spite of the importance given to the family meal and its cohesive role in the family, researchers have begun to challenge key aspects of this perspective (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Notions of the family meal as a significant component for maintaining household and family unity may under-estimate the extent to which the family meal can also operate as a center of conflict and a divisive element within the household (Coveney, 2002). Researchers have shown how gender conflict around food-related issues can lead to domestic violence in some cases (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1980). Moreover, strained relationships between adult and adolescent family members may result in fragmented family eating practices where children avoid family meals and instead choose to eat with other family members outside the home or with friends (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ackard, Moe, & Perry, 2000a, 2000b). Such studies illustrate the extent to which the sharing of food can either play a role in developing unity within the family, or highlight and enhance pre-existing divisive elements within the home.

Existing research on the family meal may also have under-estimated the extent to which variations in contemporary families including different family types (single-person household, nuclear, extended and step families) and differences in social class and ethnicity may result in significant variations in the way that individuals structure family meals and organize relationships around them (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008). Such variations lead us to question the extent to which the family can be viewed as "a single unit of consumption" (Campbell, 1995). Rather than viewing the home as functioning as a single unit in which the food consumption practices are examined as a whole, it may be more useful, as Delphy (1979) has suggested, to conceptualize it as more like a distribution center for its members in which a wide-range of decision-making processes are made by different members of the household (see also Valentine, 1999). Questioning notions of a unitary family household allows us to examine the decision-making processes that take place within the home, highlighting the agency or capability of making purposeful actions of family members, including children (Giddens, 1984), and the meanings associated with those decisions.

In this paper, we will attempt to uncover the heterogeneity of eating practices within the households of a small sample of ethnic-minority girls and young women. We will highlight the wide range of domestic arrangements within which these girls live and the variety of eating practices that take place. Our work on this topic arose out of a wider study of gang-involved women, in which food- and family-related issues began to emerge from qualitative interviews. We focus specifically on young women in gangs because gender is a "key organizing tool" in the gang (Messerschmidt, 1995, p. 174), shaping involvement in violence, delinquency, or substance use (Miller, 2009). Differences in gender composition within the gang also affect the sexual division of labor within the gang, especially around child care and food preparation. In many gangs, for example, women always prepared the food served at gang meetings (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Campbell, 1984; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991). While much of the existing research on girl gang members has adopted a criminal justice perspective, our own research primarily examines the public-health consequences of their high-risk behaviors, including violence, drug and alcohol consumption, drug dealing and teen pregnancy. In pursuing this emphasis on health issues, we conducted a series of in-depth exploratory interviews on the role of eating in the lives of these young women, and examined the relationships between eating practices and their activities in the gang. We expected that an overwhelming portion of their eating practices would take place in the "surrogate family" context of the gang (Miller, 2009). In analyzing the resulting narratives, we saw the extent to which these gang girls, while often alienated from their families, talked extensively about eating in the home as well. These young women were involved not only in consuming food within the home, but also in the purchasing and preparation of food. Furthermore, it became clear that the girls came from a range of households and domestic arrangements with diverse eating practices and patterns. These findings led us to realize the extent to which the characteristics of their family meals differed from the portrayal of family meals often described in the research literature on eating in white, middle-class, nuclear families. In the rest of the paper, we examine the types of households within which these girls and young women live and their different types of eating arrangements. Our objective is to consider more explicitly both the context and meaning of food in the lives of these young people, and the relationships between their family relations and eating practices, thereby increasing our understanding of the complexity of intra-familial processes that occur around eating in the home.

Methods

Participants

The data for this article, as noted above, are drawn from a large qualitative study of high-risk behaviors of adolescent girls and young women who are gang-involved and living in the San Francisco Bay Area. While scholarship on at-risk girls has increased, little of this research has focused on health-compromising behaviors, and even less on the eating practices of these "at-risk" girls (Arcan, Kubik, Fulkerson, & Story, 2009; Harris, 2004), such as girls in street gangs, who are at the nexus of a variety of different high-risk behaviors (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1997). These girls grow up in marginalized communities, often in troubled families, and participate in a high-risk peer group; thus they experience, in an extreme way, significant risk factors for dietary health problems experienced by many poor, minority